DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 275 368 JC 860 557

AUTHOR	Cohen, Arthur M.
TITLE	Toward More Precise Measures of College Contributions. Southern Association of Community and Junior Colleges Occasional Paper, Volume 5, Number 1.
INSTITUTION	Southern Association of Community and Junior Colleges.
PUB DATE	Jan 87
NOTE	5p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Editor, SACJC Occasional Paper Series, Piedmont Virginia Community College, Charlottesville, VA 22901 ($3.00).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Collected Works - Serials (022)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Education; *College Curriculum; College Role; *Community Colleges; Curriculum; Data Collection; Definitions; *Educational Objectives; General Education; Liberal Arts; Research Problems; *Student Educational Objectives; *Transfer Programs; Two Year Colleges; Two Year College Students

ABSTRACT

A major reason for the paucity of usable data on the contributions and effectiveness of community colleges is that the definitions on which the data are based are imprecise. Colleges' contributions might be better understood if their functions were reconceptualized. The collegiate dimension of community colleges (i.e, that portion of the curriculum stemming from the liberal arts and the services designed to promote transfer) does not resemble the contemplative, text-centered courses that are held as the university ideal, but instead is oriented towards general education. While the collegiate dimension of the community college serves the general education function well, it is inappropriate to characterize this curriculum as a transfer program. The fact that a class carries transfer credit is an artifact of college accreditation, staffing, and financing, having little to do with the perceptions, goals, or intentions of the students who are enrolled. To differentiate curriculum content from student intent, the curriculum could be characterized as comprising liberal arts (i.e., science, social science, humanities, and fine and performing arts) and skills (i.e., basic, recreational, occupational) courses. Students' intentions can be determined by asking the students to indicate whether they are attending college at this time to: (1) prepare for transfer to a four-year college or university; (2) gain skills necessary to enter a new occupation; (3) gain skills necessary to retrain, remain current, or advance in a current occupation; or (4) satisfy a personal interest. By separating questions of curriculum content from student intent, both may be assessed more accurately. (LAL)

Southern Association of Community and Junior Colleges

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George B. Vaughan, Editor

Volume 5, Number 1, January, 1987

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Toward More Precise Measures of College Contributions

by Arthur M. Cohen

Are the community colleges effective? In what ways? For whom? Frequently asked but rarely answered satisfactorily, those questions reflect the most persistent issue afflicting the colleges: their contribution to their constituency.

Because the data regarding students and programs are scanty and capable of innumerable interpretations, any estimate of institutional contribution may be readily refuted. College proponents and antagonists alike have little to support their claims. Both suffer equally: those who contend that the colleges assist all students in meeting their goals and those who argue that students attending community colleges jeopardize their chances to complete the baccalaureate or to obtain employment in their chosen field.

A major reason for the paucity of usable data is that the definitions on which the data are based are imprecise. The inadequacies of the definitions appear in the attempts to answer the most basic questions: What percent of the students transfer? (Percent of what? Full time students only? Those who intended to transfer? Excluding students who already had degrees?) What percent of the students obtain employment in the field for which they were prepared? (Percent of those who completed the programs? Excluding those who already had jobs and were seeking only to upgrade their skills? Obtained employment within what time period?) What percent of the community is served? (Those taking either credit or non-credit classes? Attending college-sponsored shows? Using the college board room for their meetings?)

The colleges' contributions might be better understood if certain of their functions were reconceptualized. This article reviews the collegiate dimension of community colleges and postulates a feasibly implemented redefinition of curriculum and student success measures.

The Collegiate Dimension

The collegiate dimension of community colleges is that portion of the curriculum stemming from the liberal arts and those aspects of the college that are designed to propel students through to senior institutions. The curriculum centers on those courses that carry credit toward the associate degree and are accepted by the four-year colleges and universities for credit toward the baccalaureate. Sometimes labeled "transfer studies," this liberal arts-based curriculum includes courses in the humanities, sciences, social sciences, fine arts, mathematics, and English. Not all of the students taking those classes intend transferring and, even among those who do, a relatively small proportion ever move on to the higher learning beyond the community college. For most of their enrollees, the community college liberal arts courses represent the last exposure to collegiate studies.

No curriculum has intrinsic worth; all can be justified only according to their value to the society that supports the school. Courses directed toward individual benefit (learning a hobby, enhancing self-concept, filling leisure time) may be popular but, since they are considered indulgent, they do not gain public acclaim. That is why these courses appear most often in the self-supporting community service programs and in the marginally funded area of continuing education. "Offer them if you want," say many state lawmakers, "but don't send us the bill." Curriculums that promote social cohesion or economic development are more likely to engage support. Since the liberal arts are rarely justified for their usefulness in the workplace, their proponents are more likely to comment on their contribution to the well-being of the community.

Even so, higher education is deeply involved with preparing people to enter the workforce. And, just as the liberal arts curriculum in the university is compromised by the institution's professional schools, the curriculum in the community college is compromised by the institution's occupational education emphasis. Most liberal arts study in the community college is in service to the occupational programs, not only the certificate and associate degree programs but also those requiring that students transfer to universities and obtain higher degrees before entering the workforce. And just as the universities could never have commanded the share of public support that they enjoy if they had not developed professional schools, the community colleges without the occupational programs would have been severely attenuated, remaining as post-graduate training centers for the secondary schools or as narrowly-based screening and sorting centers for the universities.

The proponents of the liberal arts might prefer rationalizing their courses as contributing to their students' love of learning and the scholarly quest, but few are so naive. Most recognize their curriculum's service to occupations and accept it because they know that occupational preparation is one of their institution's major functions. They also know that general education is a major function and welcome that be-

cause the goals of general education are more consistent with their own values. Their respect for their own contributions is greater when they feel they are helping students to understand themselves and society than it is when they are merely teaching skills.

The faculty members cling to general education as a goal and teach accordingly: general survey courses and introductions to concepts and terminology within each curricular area. Their marginal affiliation with academic disciplinary associations has helped them avoid most of the excessively specialized instruction designed for people who are going to conduct research in a disciplinary field. The philosophy instructors in the community college have avoided an inordinate concern with analytic examinations and have maintained interpretations of concepts of truth, justice, ethics, and logic. The psychology instructors in community colleges are likely to direct students toward understanding interpersonal relations and self-motivations, less likely to attend to the measurement of trivia. The literature instructors have avoided the immoderate concern with textual analysis that afflicts their university counterparts.

The result is that the liberal arts in community colleges hardly resemble the contemplative, text-centered courses that are held as the university ideal. They are more likely general education manifestations. Interdisciplinary or integrated humanities and social science classes have made some headway, but the general education of most students is accommodated through single classes. Connections among classes are rare because few students attend in linear fashion, taking one class and another in a predetermined sequence. Each class makes its own contribution.

General education is effective. Many more students achieve the desired outcomes of general education through the liberal arts classes than the number who become majors in an academic discipline or who otherwise reveal an attachment to contemplative study in depth. A survey of students in Washington's community colleges found those who had taken liberal arts courses moving toward general education outcomes. The more courses the students had taken, the more confident they were in their ability to speak and write effectively and in their awareness of different viewpoints. They were more likely to say they had developed a sense of values, an understanding of social issues, and an understanding of scientific developments. Conversely, the more classes in business that the students had taken, the less confident they were about each of those general education goals.

A common misconception is to characterize this curriculum as a transfer program. Courses with titles suggestive of their roots in the liberal arts are listed in the catalogs, with students advised to take certain classes in order to qualify for transfer to various programs at the universities. But exceedingly few students take the classes in the recommended sequences and then go on to receive associate degrees and to transfer. Few of the courses listed have prerequisites; most students take them in whatever order suits their personal schedules. They drop in and out of the institutions, taking major program requirements now, general education graduation requirements another time, and electives, all without concern for pattern or sequence. The transfer program cannot reasonably be defined by perusing the sequences as listed in the catalogs.

The terms "transfer program" and "transfer courses," confound student behavior with course content. The students in an art class that carries transfer credit may already have baccalaureate degrees and be enrolled only so that they may paint under the direction of an instructor. The students in a class in child development offered under a psychology course title may be there to gain credentials in child care; the transfer credit carried by the course is irrelevant to those who want only to enter occupations that do not require the baccalaureate. Most students take physical education classes for their personal interest. The fact that all those classes carry transfer credit is an artifact of college accreditation, staffing, and financing. It has little to do with the perceptions or intentions of the students who are enrolled.

However, the transfer function must be sustained if the colleges are to maintain their place in the mainstream of graded education that characterizes the American educational system. All the calls for more responsiveness to students' desires for activities that satisfy their immediate desires founder on that rock. Without the transfer function, the community college takes on the form of a neighborhood adult school and risks losing much of its support base.

Some students transfer but most have no such intention: they already have degrees and they are attending the community college to gain new skills; they are enrolled in occupational programs for which a certificate or associate in applied science degree suffices for entry into an occupation; they have jobs and want a course or two to upgrade their skills; or they are attending for purely avocational interest. Furthermore, many students who do transfer have taken remedial and other courses for which the universities do not award credit.

Content/Intent

A new measure of institutional functioning would be based on differentiating curriculum content from student intent. Curriculum content would be characterized as:

Liberal Arts

- Science
- Social Science
- Humanities
- Fine and Performing Arts

Skills

- Basic
- Recreational
- Occupational

The rationale for this division of curriculum content is that the liberal arts have been distinctly modified in the direction of general education and cannot well be understood by using the traditional content categories that the community colleges inherited from the universities. Portions of the content in humanities, sciences, social sciences, and fine arts have moved far from the liberal arts ideal. A major portion of the content in those areas falls under skill development: the remedial classes in English, mathematics, and in some of the sciences most obviously. Those liberal arts courses that are in distinct

service to occupational programs similarly should be placed under the category of skill development. And the portions of the fine arts courses that are obviously designed for enhancing the students' recreational skills need also to be separated. Whether or not any or all of these courses are accepted for credit toward bachelor's degrees is irrelevant.

The transfer function similarly would be better understood if students' intentions were more carefully described. Asking students if they intend to obtain a bachelor's or higher degree yields the distorted answers that can be expected when no limits are placed; few students believe they will never progress further. Many of the students who say they want to gain baccalaureate and higher degrees or to enter professions that require such degrees exhibit behavior that runs counter to their aspirations. They avoid the collegiate courses that require mathematics or writing skills, and they fail to participate in collegiate activities such as seeking counseling, speaking with instructors outside of class, or attending college events organized to integrate them into the fabric of the institutions. They seem to want their classes to do it all, to be the magic carpet that transports them to the university and to the high-status careers to which they aspire.

However, in fairness to the students, the question does not assess their actual reasons for attending. It should be asked as a forced choice among alternatives:

What is the most important reason that you are attending this college at this time? (Mark only one answer)

☐ To prepare for transfer to a four-year college or university
☐ To gain skills necessary to enter a new occupation
☐ To gain skills necessary to retrain, remain current, or advance in a current occupation
☐ To satisfy a personal interest (cultural, social)

When the question of student intent is so posed, the proportion seeking to transfer drops to around one-third and the "percentage of students transferring" gains a different denominator; thus, student intentions should be categorized as:

Prepare for transfer
Gain skills for new occupation
Occupational upgrading
Personal interest

By so separating curriculum content from student intent, both may be assessed more accurately. The content of the curriculum can be estimated by classifying the courses that are actually offered each year. This can be done by counting the class sections and enrollment figures, using the catalog descriptions of the classes to make the determinations of content classification. The ratio of college effort ascribed to each curriculum category can thus be readily determined.

Student intentions can be estimated by asking the indicated question of all students who enroll. The question can be placed on every student's registration card. In colleges where that procedure is not feasible, the questions could be asked in a survey of students in a sample of all class sections offered. Measures of success then can be drawn by determining the percentage of students who attained the goal which they sought when they matriculated, with further subdivisions made according to the length of time that it took for them to attain it.

Categorizing curriculum according to its content would assist in understanding each college's role in providing general education, basic skills, recreational skills, and occupationally-specific training for the people of its community. Classifying student intentions would yield a better measure of the types of people who are being served, the purposes for which they come to the college, and the extent they achieve them. This form of information could be used by state agencies in allocating funds within the colleges as an aid to resource allocation, and, not least, as a constant public information resource that would assist college spokespersons in explaining what their colleges actually do.

As measurement depends on definition, definition depends on concept. Unless some of the concepts basic to the community colleges are reified, the community college analysts, proponents, antagonists, and neutral observers alike must continue contending in the dark. Separating curriculum content from student intent seems a feasible first step.

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This paper is excerpted from a chapter in a book on the collegiate dimension of community colleges, by Arthur M. Cohen and Florence B. Brawer, to be published by Jossey-Bass, Inc., in summer, 1987.

Additional copies of this occasional paper may be obtained by writing the editor, care of Piedmont Virginia Community College, Charlottesville, Virginia 22901. Copies are three dollars each, including mailing.

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DEC 12 1986